English 2010

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Adjusting to New Surroundings

Kalervo Oberg’s famous speech in 1954 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, gave us an understanding about four common stages that people experience when going to live in a new culture, city, or country. Oberg was an anthropologist who lived in countries around the world and the process he described is still used by experts even in 2013. Briefly, here is what people often experience. In the first stage, everything seems interesting and exciting. It’s the “honeymoon” stage. But fairly quickly, you are hit with “culture shock”. In this second stage, the new language, places, faces, and customs seem overwhelming. You might feel like hiding in your room. Then in the third stage, you feel strangely “schizophrenic” or “up and down”: one day very happy, the next homesick or depressed, maybe confused by people and a place that seem so strange. Finally, the fourth stage brings a resolution. You figure out how “to make it” and this resolution can be very different for every person because we all have different goals and interests. In this essay I want to tell you how I experienced Oberg’s four stages, I will include a published source which describes and explains important details about the stage based on research or other people’s experiences.

I remember my honey moon stage very clearly. Even as I was preparing to leave my home, I was convinced exciting days were ahead. Here are all the things I hoped to enjoy in my new country. I was going to visit new places and have the opportunity to speak English fluently because I have had studied it through all my junior and high school years. I was sure it was not going to be hard.

But then, culture shock hit! I will never forget this one particular funny experience that made me wonder if I wanted to stay in this strange new place. I had to call and make a doctor’s appointment for my little daughter. I dialed the doctor’s office number and when the medical assistant asked me what was the reason of my call, I answered: “I want to make a date with the doctor for my daughter”. A “date” was the word for appointment I had learned in my English class when I was a student. Obviously, the assistant was speechless on the phone.

Another huge cultural shock I experienced was during my family’s first Christmas in the United States. In my culture, Christmas Eve is a special night. The whole day is a special day. Is summer and some people are still buying some last minute presents or some groceries for the big dinner feast that night. Kids are super excited trying to burn the day out. Families get together for dinner to celebrate and wait until midnight to open presents and wish Merry Christmas to each other. Usually we stay up until three or four a.m. because there are zero obligations the next day. So, for my family, that very first Christmas Eve living in this land was cultural shock. I could not believe that streets were with no kids because they were already in bed. It was difficult to understand that December twenty fourth did not have the importance other cultures give to that day. I could not agree more with Oberg, author of the article *Cultural Shock: Adjustment to new cultural Environments.*  He exhorts,” All those cues such as customs, or norms acquired by us in the course of growing up are as much as part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept.” That first Christmas here, we felt we were orphans in the middle of a cold snowy and dark night. Oberg, a main voice in this conversation, goes further, “when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broadminded or full of good you may be” The Christmas that followed, was different. We learned how to unfold to our new reality. In fact, the second one was a blast playing in the snow outside, sharing some cookies with our neighbors and mixing those new traditions with our own ones.

Erlyn Baack, referring to this conversation in his essay *Effect of Living in a Foreign Country,* suggests in what is called second main effect, living in a culture that is not yours, learn “ how to accept another type of society and culture into your daily life”, also he adds more, “when you live in a place with different custom and traditions from yours; you have to be able to develop yourself in unknown conditions” In our case, moving constantly from one place to another, we realized that in order to succeed and have a good experience, is essential to have an adventure heart, the desire to absorb and accept what is different from us and, somehow, go with the flow.

Somehow I made it to “Stage Three”, but it was such a bumpy period of time. In this paragraph I will give examples of things about my new country that I figured out and that made me even happy. First of all, I learned to make an “appointment” if I want to take any of my children to the doctor. I am not having a date with him. I have countless experiences that taught me how to navigate in my new home. It took me a while to learn and understand the yellow lines in the middle of the road while driving. They were confusing at the beginning but then, I founded out that they prevent from slow traffic and they are very safe.

One can find a good list of advices in the process of being a stranger in a new land. The Study Abroad Center of the University of California developed a series of *Tips to Ease Cultural Adjustment.* One that stands out for me is, “Do not expect to find things as you have them at home…” I say, just prepare yourself to go out there and be! Challenge yourself and find new paths. Other tip that has sense for anyone in *How to Prepare Cultural Adjustment,* was, “Realize that other people may have thought patterns and concepts of time which are very different than yours- not inferior, just different”, and they deserve your respect. Is not a war to determine what culture is better or which way is the correct form. Is about to live together sharing one’s own traditions in a shared planet.

Now I found my own way to live in a new home. Here is what works for me. Always have an open heart to receive and learn. Having a multicultural family makes life more interesting: I am from Chile, my husband is from Argentina, three of my four children are from my homeland, and my youngest daughter is American, same as my son and daughter in law. I have two beautiful grandchildren born in the United States. Our family’s gatherings are very intense as we work combining traditions from home, the ones from here and a few adopted ones living in several countries. Finally, now days, with globalization; families are a good mixture of different cultures.

# Works Cited

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